

# Massachusetts governor weighs 27 cent gas tax hike

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BOSTON - Gov. Deval Patrick is considering raising the gasoline tax in Massachusetts by 27 cents per gallon as part of a comprehensive transportation overhaul plan, The Associated Press learned Monday.

The proposal would stave off a doubling of Turnpike tolls planned for this summer, but would leave the state with the highest gasoline tax in the nation at 50.5 cents.

A policy draft obtained Monday by the AP said the added tax would be dedicated to paying down the debt of the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority, funding regional transit authorities and removing some tolls on the Massachusetts Turnpike.

Tolls would be removed west of Route 128 by the end of next year. Tolls within Route 128, from Weston to Boston, would come down as the state shifts to a program of tracking — and charging — all drivers based on the miles they travel.

Trips would be measured by a chip installed in a vehicle inspection sticker as soon as 2014, and drivers would receive a gas-tax refund to avoid double payments. New York currently has the nation's highest state gas tax, at 41.3 cents per gallon.

"The Patrick administration recognizes that a greener, more fuel-efficient transportation system means that the gas tax will become a less viable (means) of funding our transportation system," said the document prepared by Transportation Secretary James Aloisi. "A user-fee based system, collected electronically, is a fair way to pay for our transportation needs in the future."

An administration spokesman said the governor has made no final decisions about his plan, which is promised by the end of the month.

"We're finalizing our transportation reform plan," Patrick spokesman Joe Landolfi said. "It will be a comprehensive initiative, but no final decisions have been made — especially on a gas tax."

Patrick has repeatedly said that he opposes any broad-based tax increase without accompanying policy reforms. The Turnpike Authority's vote in November to hike tolls effective this spring touched off a firestorm of public protest and has created an environment where legislators are openly debating just such a comprehensive reform, as

well as a gas tax increase as a more equitable means of charging drivers for using public roads.

Senate President Therese Murray and Sen. Steve Baddour, co-chairman of the Joint Committee on Transportation, filed legislation last week that embodies their own overhaul proposal, and the new House speaker, Robert DeLeo, has said passing a bill will be one of his first priorities.

Under Patrick's plan, expected to be outlined Feb. 18, the state would streamline its disparate transportation agencies into four divisions: Highway, Rail and Transit, Aviation and Port, and Registry of Motor Vehicles.

The state would also have a Massachusetts Transportation Trust Fund that would be a protected repository for gasoline taxes, Registry fees, tolls, MBTA fares and other transportation funding.

The plan calls for the state's Highway Division to receive \$325 million, or 12.5 cents, of the added 27 cents-per-gallon gas tax. The MBTA would receive \$286 million, or 11 cents, while the regional transit authorities would receive \$39 million, or 1.5 cents.

The Highway Division would oversee all state-owned roads and bridges, except for Department of Conservation and Recreation parkways and bridges and the Tobin Bridge. It would continue to collect tolls at the Boston Harbor tunnel crossings, as well as the state borders with New York and Connecticut.

The Rail and Transit Division would encompass the MBTA and the regional transit authorities, while the Aviation Division would assume the functions of the Massachusetts Aeronautics Commission. The Massachusetts Port Authority would remain an independent entity within the division, overseeing Logan International Airport and Hanscom Field in Bedford.

The Registry would continue to regulate drivers and vehicle licensing while developing the VMT — or Vehicle Miles Traveled — program.

The proposal also includes changes for Massport, including mandating a \$2 parking fee increase so the authority can contribute to mutually beneficial transportation initiatives. The proposal would have the transportation secretary become Massport's board chairman, a potentially controversial element after agency leadership was professionalized following the terrorist hijackings at Logan on Sept. 11, 2001.

In perhaps one effort to build political support for the program, Patrick is considering expanding a resident toll discount program from Charleston, South Boston, East Boston and the North End to include Winthrop — DeLeo's hometown.

Residents would be charged 50 cents more than a one-way MBTA fare to encourage the use of public transportation, with their payment increasing in step with future MBTA fare increases.